Bubble City: Chapter 11

Jason was a man on the run: Google, with their paws in every phone and PC from here to China, was looking for him. Visiting his friends was out of the question; Google surely had all of them under surveillance. And calling or emailing them was dangerous too. You never knew when they had a Google-powered phone or forwarded their email to a Gmail account (which lots of people did now just for spam filtering). But what if he didn't share anything private? He could at least send a message through Tor telling his friends what had happened.

The library was closing soon, so he hurriedly composed an email for Sarah:

Dear Sarah,

I know what I'm going to say will make you think I've gone even farther off the deep-end than I already have, but it's my best shot. I found a backdoor in a popular algorithm and now Google is out to get me. I have to hide out for the moment, but so far I'm OK. Please make sure my friends and folks at the office don't get too worried about me.

I can't check my email without giving myself away, so if you want to write back, purchase a classified ad in the *New York Times* — use the word "Sarton".

Missing you,

Jason

There, that ought to be at least a start. This way at least Sarah would know what was up and he'd have a safe channel for hearing back from Sarah. Never any harm in having another channel for information, right?

Jason bought himself a pillow and spent the night sleeping with some homeless people in a little cranny near the library that they claimed each night. They had turned the unused nook into their own little community, gabbing and singing and dancing until late, before curling up in a dark place in a sleeping bag that looked like it had been left out for several decades and turning in for the night. One by one, each of them disappeared to curl up and Jason joined them. By the time the sun and streetsweepers and cars awoke him the next morning, they were all gone, as if their little homeless community had never happened in the first place.

Jason looked out over the world just waking up — cars driving to work before the rush hour traffic hit, a couple people scurrying by, shops getting ready to open their doors — and felt like the world was full of possibility. He stretched out and began walking into its gloriously bright morning before he realized it wasn't.

Trent knew that staying on top of the business world meant staying on top of what was happening. So he grabbed an intern and headed to The Butler and the Chef, a South Park restaurant for one of his espionage breakfasts. Corporate executives from all over town came here to have lunch and do deals and Trent made sure he stayed on top of what they were doing by taking regular chances to come here and eavesdrop on their conversations.

Of course, he knew that others were eavesdropping on his own, which is why he brought along the intern: disinformation. "So, uh, what secret projects are you working on, Trent?" said the intern in a stage voice. "I'm glad you asked," Trent replied. "Things at Newsflip have never been more exciting. In fact, *don't tell anyone this*, but we're in the middle of acquisition talks."

"Really?" the intern said, looking a bit worried. "I hadn't heard that — with who?" "With whom," Trent corrected. "With whom?" "Well, I'm not at liberty to say. But let's just say it rhymes with boo-gull." "Wow," said the intern, genuinely worried now. "For how much?" "Oh come on," Trent said laughing, "you know I can't disclose that." "Oh, but just a hint?" "Well, if you insist… It's somewhere between $200 million and $201 million. A-ha-ha-ha." The intern, knowing his options wouldn't vest unless he managed to keep his job for another six months, looked down at his soup.

Wayne was having trouble sleeping. He showed up at his office looking even more disheveled than usual. Even his assistant, who had taken to spending the days chatting with friends on the phone and watching YouTube videos, noticed something was up. "Something wrong, sir?" she asked. Wayne mumbled and shuffled into his office.

It was this damn issue of the kid. Wayne knew, rationally, that it was all for the best, but in his heart it just felt wrong to him. He felt like he ought to use his influence to do something. But what could he do? Why, he'd talk about it on his show, of course — Google money be damned. He set up the video camera and began thinking about what he was going to say.

"I know I've been a supporter of Google in the past," he'd started. "But I think they've finally crossed the line."

He looked at himself in the video preview. His shirt was askew and his hair in wild clumps standing up from his head. Everything looked badly wrinkled.

"I've recently received information that they are chasing and persecuting a young kid just beca—"

He looked into his own eyes on the monitor. And then he shut off the camera. Nobody would believe him. He didn't have any evidence. And he certainly didn't look credible. And then what? Google would go after him — not only take away the nice office and the pretty assistant, but drag his name through the mud. And God knows what they'd do to his search results. Wayne shuddered to think of it.

No, he needed to work this from the inside. Get more information at the very least. He put in a call to Samuel.

Sarah read over the email. Then she paused and read it again. And then she freaked out.

"Hey, Samuel," Wayne said. "Wayne, good to hear from you, what's up?" "Oh, I was just calling to talk about asking if I could come see some Google people I wanted to talk to." "Umm," Samuel said. "What do you mean?" "Well, you know that story you were telling me the other night, you know the story about the kid?" "I don't know what you're talking about, Wayne." "Come on, the other night, at the bar, when you were telling me about the kid you wanted to take o—" "Wayne, don't be silly — I was just kidding around about that stuff." Samuel laughed. "Heh, you took me seriously? Come on. You really think a company like this would do stuff like that. Give me a break! Anyway, if you want the real story you should just come by the offices sometime." "Oh. Uh, okay. How about today?" "Oh, well,

umm, I guess that works. What time?" "Let's say around 3?" "Sure, come on by." "Great, see you then." "Great, bye." "Bye."

Jason was upset. He was letting his emotional mind get the best of him — hanging out with homeless people on the street and at the library, writing letters to Sarah. He needed to think rationally. He needed coffee.

He spent some of his little remaining cash on a large cup of coffee and stole a newspaper from behind a register so he could diagram his situation on it.

Here's how it is: Google was using NNA to control the news. He'd found out about this. Google had found out about him. Google didn't want people to know, so they were trying to stop him. He was trying to stop Google.

The solution was obvious: he just needed to use the backdoor to tell everyone about what he'd discovered and how Google had been chasing him. Proving it would be hard but the fact that he could control the news to force his story to the top would probably be proof enough. Google would try to shut things down, of course, but that would only draw more attention. There's nothing Internet geeks hate more than having stuff shut down.

So he just needed to use Tor to launch another exploit on the backdoor. It'd probably require a few tries to get right and he'd have to be very careful about covering his tracks and moving around, but it seemed doable.

He was just about to fold up the newspaper when he spotted the classifieds. He figured he might as well check for a note from Sarah. He scrolled thru them, looking for the word Sarton. Then he found it:

Dear Sarton, use your powers and say goodbye to the girl. Love, G.

Shit, he thought.

Back at the office, Trent ran down his list of priorities. Being the boss meant there was just too much to do and far too little time to do it, so Trent had developed a system. Actually, he hadn't really developed a system, he'd bought one that had come highly recommended. And he didn't practice it so much as give it to his assistant and order her to do it.

She'd come back and insisted that she couldn't actually do it all by herself, that there were things like RAM dumps and reviews that only he could really practice. "Oh, alright," he said, "I'll do the reviews. How do I do that?" And she'd explained that once a week he needed to blah blah blah, anyway, he just knew it was important to go over his priorities and see how well he was doing at all of them.

"Spreadsheets" — he'd gotten those all off. "Boost morale" — his meetings had almost certainly done that. "Welcome new guy" — oh yeah, where was the new guy. He recalled him sitting over… hmm, his seat was empty. He headed over, deciding to take a hands-on approach. "Hey, anyone seen the new guy?" "Nah, he's been working odd hours the past few days." "Hmm, well I guess I did say he could work from home. Hey, what's that your working on?" "Oh, uh, nothing." "No, come on, bring that window back, I want to see it." "Umm, uh, yeah, here it is." "Wow, this looks great — I just have a few comments. This whole sidebar needs to be purple and instead of a list of news stories this should show the blog posts with the number of comments. And each one should have a little picture — pictures are key; they draw attention." "Um, right — yeah, I guess so." "Glad we're on the same page — I'll see you later."

Trent headed back to his desk and called over his assistant. "Sandy," he said. "Tell Jane to meet me in my meditation chamber." "Yes, sir," she said, and Trent watched as she rushed back towards her desk. He grabbed the bag under his desk and headed to the meditation chamber. God, he loved running a company.

Wayne got in his car and headed down the long Bay Area highways toward Mountain View. He passed offices and billboards, trees and curving streets, HOV lanes and overpasses. But eventually he ended up in what could have been its own small city, a maze of office buildings and little poorly-signed streets. At the center of it all was the famed Building 42 complex, with its volleyball courts and dinosaur skeletons and huge cafeterias, and sexy colorful architecture. But radiating out from that were increasingly drab gray buildings separated by large streets and parking lots where they kept all the real employees, the people who stayed up into 3 in the morning to make sure that the Java code that drew the sidebars of help pages worked properly.

As Google had built more and more projects, they needed an increasing number of these grunt-work programmers. They had started interviewing just about everyone CS graduate, in the hopes of filtering out the good ones and luring them here to their artificial wonderland in Mountain View.

Wayne headed for the lobby.

Next year: [Chapter 12](#)

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